The natural world of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* is extremely well-developed on its own. The ways in which she dances between topics of death by water and life by light stands by itself as an amazing thematic setup. Robinson's Christian background, however, plays a huge part in elevating these themes to another level. Because the purpose of the Bible is not only to explain the nature of the world but also the nature of humanity, this important layer of *Housekeeping* ties together so many of its already-golden settings and characters. By complementing the natural world and its fictional inhabitants with biblical themes, Robinson connects a story about transience and growing up to a much larger picture of humanity's position on Earth and the greater spiritual universe.

When imagining the divine cosmos, there are several interpretations of how everything fits together. In Christian theology there is the existence of Earth, Heaven, and Hell. These three settings have their parallels within *Housekeeping*, all of which relate to the character's relationships with the natural world.

At the start of the novel, we are essentially given a Book of Genesis for the characters and settings of *Housekeeping*. Ruth gives an expansive history of her family and all of the inhabitants of her grandfather's house. The recounting of—what feels to Ruth like—ancient history may be indicative of the histories relayed in the Old Testament. Character-packed sentences like, "I grew up with my sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher" (3) feel as expositionally laid out as the tenth chapter of Genesis, which spends the entirety of its time listing the innumerably large number of Noah's grandchildren, and some of the children of their own[1]. Like Genesis, this first chapter feels less like a story and more like a mythical explanation of the origins of the house. One of the three divine settings, Earth, has thus been given a parallel in *Housekeeping*. We can see the house and Earth as equivalents not only because of their introduction, but also thanks to the transformative process it provides to the characters throughout the rest of the novel. This idea of Earth and mortal life as a transformative plane is laid out when describing Ruth's grandmother, who sees "life as a road down which one traveled, an easy enough road through a broad country, and that one's destination was there from the very beginning, a measured distance away, standing in the ordinary light like some plain house where one went in and was greeted by respectable people" (9-10). This adage establishes life as an earthly experience ending with a house. The rest of Housekeeping serves to challenge this idea by positing the house as the place where change is experienced, using Ruth and Lucille as examples of this. The sisters are, as Laura Callanan puts it, "both exile and native at once, and [their] anxieties are often a reflection of this distant and paradoxical state." This distance they feel toward the home—and thus Earth—is thanks to their grandmother's Christian understanding of life as ending with the home, along with their childhood spent in an apartment. For the rest of the novel, this leaves the sisters in pursuit of what that end-of-life place really is.

Ironically, Robinson's representation of the *natural* world—Earth—is a house. In other words, the only third of the Earth-Heaven-Hell trinity that we, as corporeal beings, can perceive is an unnatural structure built from the exploitation of nature. Thanks to his use of the word "pilgrims," this ties into the point George B. Handley makes that "[i]f heaven is the desired other

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[1] All of which are born after the Flood, one of the most famously destructive natural events in Christian history, and one that is constantly referenced throughout the novel, with words like "ark" and "moored ship" being used to describe the Foster house.

sphere, then the earth is a mere waystation, its destiny irrelevant to ours, and we are ontological pilgrims on our way out." Sylvie can be seen as one of these "ontological pilgrims" because of her relationship with the house, *Housekeeping*'s representation of Earth. The house, a structure built by the long-dead patriarch of the family, becomes returned to nature due to Sylvie's presence—bird corpses lie around thanks to the thirteen or fourteen cats, the house floods more often, and it is only lit by the sun (Geyh). She makes nature out of a home while Ruth and Lucille make a home out of nature[2], which introduces her as something in opposition to Earth. She is in opposition to Earth because her values represent those of *Housekeeping*'s Heaven: the natural, transient lifestyle. This is obviously a much more nebulous narrative concept than "house = Earth," but with a closer reading of Ruth and Sylvie's characters and actions, it makes sense that their eventual lifestyle represents Heaven. Sylvie and Ruth's relationship is clearly one of mentorship. She descends into Lucille and Ruth's life with "three days of brilliant sunshine and four of balmy rain" (60). Following this particular line, Ruth describes several natural phenomena that happen on each of the seven days. On the seventh day, the three women assess the lake, the houses surrounding them, how the general flora has been affected, and then they rest and eat dinner. Here Robinson is drawing a connection between Sylvie's arrival in Fingerbone and the very start of the Bible. Due to the weather Sylvie brings with her, the house's transformation is begun. These seven days log the creation of what will eventually become, as Lucille describes, "Sylvie's house" (123). With each day of the week getting a detailed description and the last involving them simply resting, it's clear that Robinson wanted to give Sylvie a heavenly presence by drawing connections between her and God. This entire section is written this way in order to draw a three-way connection between Sylvie, the natural world's ever-changing state, and *Housekeeping*'s representation of Heaven. On a metaphorical level, all are synonymous with one another, each serving the advancement of Ruth and Lucille's branching arcs. In this way, every character is given strong natural, biblical, and contextual depth all at once.

By the end, both of the young sisters have split off to opposite ends of *Housekeeping*'s thematic spectrum. Ruth with transience, Sylvie, and Heaven. In this sense, Ruth could be seen as a Christ figure[3], ascended to a heavenly state of being by the metaphorical Heaven herself. Lucille, however, is…someplace else. The last few paragraphs of the book are dedicated to her ambiguous position. She could be in the house, still on Earth, "stalemating the forces of ruin" (216) and "cleansing and polishing, all these years" (217). Or she could be in Boston, escaped from the clutches of Fingerbone but still stuck waiting for Sylvie and Ruth. Regardless of where she remains physically, Ruth only images her as having, in the ghostly sense of the phrase, unfinished business. In the last imagined descriptions of her, Lucille is seemingly obsessed with water, "If Lucille is there, Sylvie and I have stood outside her window a thousand times…leaving behind us a strong smell of lake water," "Her water glass has left two-thirds of a ring on the

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[2] This is referring to the shelter made from sticks and brush which Ruth and Lucille build on the shore of the lake. Paula Geyh discusses this more in her article "Burning Down the House? Domestic Space and the Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's 'Housekeeping,'" describing it as one of many "dissolving" houses in *Housekeeping*, with their grandfather's house being one of them, only beginning to be dissolved when Sylvie enters the picture.

[3] This may also be supported by the constant mentions of "transfiguration" and miracles in the penultimate chapter (196, 198).

table, and she works at completing the circle with her thumbnail" (218) and "No one is watching [Lucille] smear her initials in the steam on her water glass with her first finger" (219). These watery examples place Lucille in thematic connection with one of the most important symbols in the novel: Lake Fingerbone. If, to Ruth, she's not living in a house that's been through a fiery attack on its structure, she's far away but still dampened by thoughts of the lake that "claimed" her sister, her mother, and her mother's sister. She has been mentally consumed by the family graveyard. Punished eternally by these thoughts, Lucille has ended up in *Housekeeping*'s Hell. Using the lake and water like this is an inversion[4] on the established image of Hell as a "furnace of fire" (Matthew 13:50) and a place where those who did not put their trust in Christ "will be tormented with fire and brimstone" (Revelations 14:10). Lucille, who did not follow Sylvie and Ruth, is left enveloped by the same dampness that prevented them from burning their house. This line of thinking, however, calls Ruth's position into question. Surely she has somewhat "ascended" to *Housekeeping*'s Heaven, but she still hasn't fully let go. She intends to "go into Fingerbone and make inquiries. [She] must do it soon, for such days are rare now" (217). Her images of Lucille are entirely fictitious, and oftentimes blend together with descriptions of herself and Sylvie. Ruth is ambiguously left with a strong connection away from Heaven, perhaps becoming the ghostly one herself. This is even foreshadowed earlier when she is reflecting on Fingerbone's own transients, "So the transients wandered through Fingerbone like ghosts, terrifying as ghosts are because they were not very different from us"[5] (178). Referring to the transients—indirectly referring to herself and Sylvie—as ghosts muddies the waters of the ending, calling their spiritual position into question. Has Ruth joined her aunt in Heaven and nature? Or is the weight of her sister, another Stone[6], sinking her back into the lake? It's fitting that this ambiguity comes at the end of the novel just as Heaven or Hell come at the end of our lives—lives spent unsure of which of those we will transcend to.

Reading *Housekeeping* in this way requires a focus on two major elements of the novel. the first is its strong connection to nature. Each character can be connected to a central, natural—or an oppositionally unnatural—symbol. Ruth to the house, Sylvie to the natural world and transience, and Lucille, theoretically, to the lake. The way each character crosses over to one another's thematic space is how Robinson is able to have a complex conversation about different human existences in the natural and unnatural world. The second major element of the novel that this reading involves is its explicit biblical themes. Ruth, Sylvie, and Lucille can each be strongly

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[4] The choice to invert this theme could be attributed to several things, but my interpretation is that Robinson is, as she usually does with Ruth (chiefly in the ending), blurring the lines between light and dark, fire and water, stability and transience. Each of the overlapping dichotomies of the novel are blended in this ending thanks to the ambiguity of Lucille's position and Ruth's mental state.

[5] This is even further connected to Ruth and Lucille a page later when Ruth describes the domiciles of Fingerbone's transients, mentioning how they live in "abandoned houses and in the ruins of fallen houses, and building their shanties and lean-tos under the bridge and along the shore" (179). Mentioning these "lean-tos…along the shore" is a direct callback to the shelter built by Ruth and Lucille much earlier in the novel. As mentioned in another footnote, Geyh talks more about their lean-to in "Burning Down the House?" referring to it as one of many "dissolving houses" in the novel.

[6] Unlike Sylvie, who is both a Foster and a Fisher, teaching Ruth her ways and pulling her from the depths of a more metaphorical Lake Fingerbone, possibly thanks to unresolved grief from Helen—a character Sylvie compares to Ruth several times.

connected to different divine positions of Christian theology. Again, though, the ways in which they invade each other's metaphorical grounds and advance from one to another are what create the book's emotional tension. These two central topics in *Housekeeping*, nature and the divine, invoke another way of thinking when combined: transcendentalism. The inherent divinity in all of the characters is, at every corner of the novel, expressed through the natural world. Robinson, not only being a Christian but also a neo-romantic, intends to bring the reader into an extremely multifaceted world using transcendentalist rhetoric—one of the most multifaceted ideologies out there (Handley). The intense complexity of Robinson's ideas turns *Housekeeping* into more of a manifesto with characters. Just as the story helps Ruth, Sylvie, and Lucille confront these topics within themselves, the novel allows the reader to apply these transcendent concepts to their position within the natural and divine world.

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